



Home-Based Early Head Start Trainings Address School Readiness

An important idea that has always been one of the cornerstones of Head Start philosophy is that parents are the most important educators of their children. Recent research has broadened this idea, finding that the first years of life, beginning at infancy, have a profound impact on a child's development. A child's readiness for school at age five and his or her subsequent school success, which can impact later success in life, depend on the child's experiences starting from birth. (See related article in the Magazine section.)

Two Home-Based Early Head Start staff professional development sessions have addressed how Home Visitors can help nurture the parent-child relationship, which is so crucial for early learning. The first session brought a trainer from the Vanderbilt

University Center on Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning to YVY EHS to introduce YVY Home Visitors to the PIWI (Parents Interacting with Children) philosophy, which provides strategies for supporting and enriching parent-child interactions.

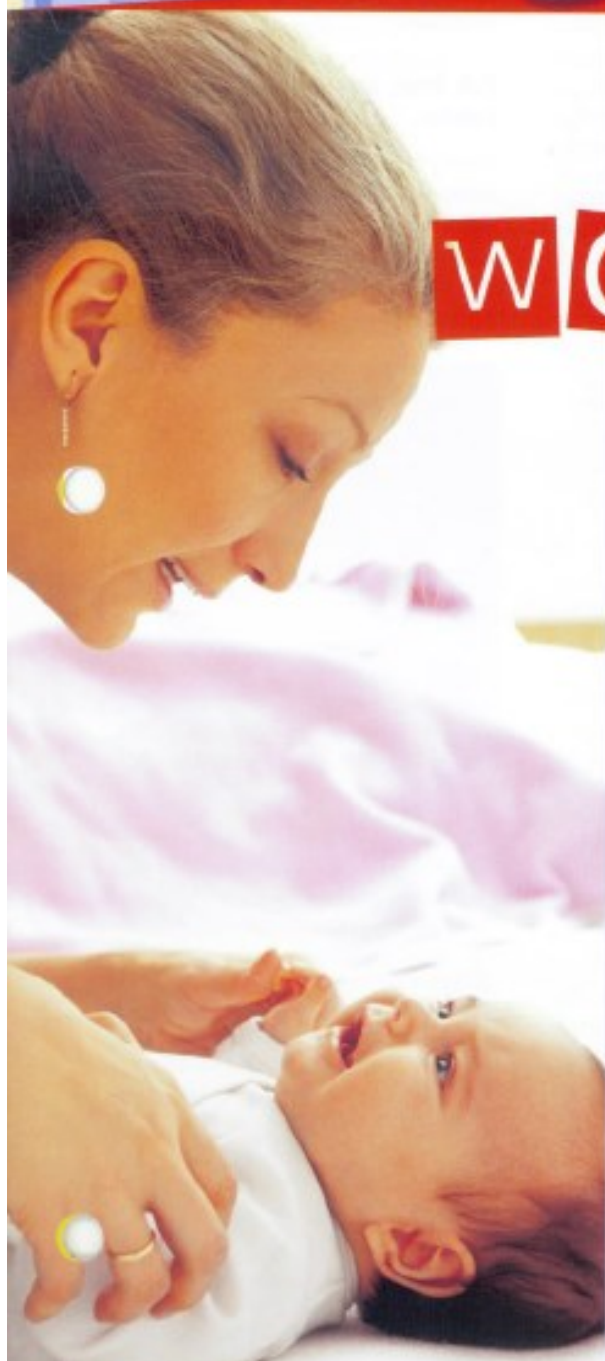
A two-day workshop by presenters from Utah State University, leaders in the field of home visiting who have had extensive EHS and home visiting experience, reinforced the importance of encouraging positive parent-child interactions and provided additional strategies to establish collaborative partnerships with parents. Supervisors were trained in the HOVRS tool, which will help them in their observations and training of Home Visitors.



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BRIDGING THE

WORD GAP

School readiness has been one of the most important ideas driving classroom practice in Head Start. Previous articles in the YVY Parent Newsletter have discussed many of the domains of development that are addressed in the Head Start classroom. These articles have stressed the importance of collaboration between parents and Head Start to assure that children are properly prepared for entry to school.

There is, however, one area of development that is primarily in the hands of parents. Many parents are not aware of the importance of talking to their babies from the time they are born. Since babies cannot answer, they do not see the value in talking to them. This reasoning extends to talking to toddlers as well.

But, this attitude has many consequences. The first years of life are critical for neurological and cognitive development. From their very first days of life, children's brains are developing rapidly, greatly influenced by their early experiences. Talking to a baby does not only help the child's language development, it also helps the child's brain development.

Research has shown that during the first years of life, children from low-income families hear roughly 30 million fewer words than children from more affluent homes. This is referred to as the 'word gap.' What a child hears has a direct consequence for what a child learns. By 18 months of age, toddlers from low-income homes are already several months behind more advantaged children in using language. This does not only mean that these children have a poorer vocabulary, but the lack in hearing

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Vocabulary Building and Technology in the Classroom and Beyond

Technology companies are reacting to the wide publicity about the word gap by offering technological solutions for the classroom to try to address this gap. Preliminary research results have shown that computer-based individualized vocabulary enrichment exercises that are tailored to each child's previous knowledge and progress can help children build vocabulary and understanding. As more schools adopt these programs, more definitive results will emerge.

Harnessing the power of technology to help address the word gap is also behind a new initiative by the federal government to grant a prize to a company that will create a technology-based intervention to encourage parents and caregivers to engage in more back-and-forth interactions with young children ages 0-4.

words can cause difficulty in learning new words. Children who enter school with smaller vocabularies are, therefore, at a disadvantage even before they step into a classroom, and they are more likely to fall behind. Later interventions are not as successful as very early learning because early experiences shape brain development.

The gaps between those children who have rich experiences with words and those who hear fewer words in early childhood only widens over the early elementary years. In fact, children's school success at ages nine and ten can be linked to the amount of talk they hear from birth to age three. Since this achievement gap often persists through childhood and even into adulthood, it can have lifelong implications for a child's success, health and wellbeing in our modern age, where literacy and higher-level thinking skills are so important.

In fact, the federal government has recognized that the word gap has implications for the economic and social well-being of the country as a whole and has initiated several programs to address this problem.

So what can parents do to help their children? Research has shown that parents and caregivers can help close the word gap and the resulting achievement gap by providing their children from birth to five with consistent, language-rich experiences. Such experiences are satisfying and fun for both parents and children, in addition to being educational.

So, Talk, Read, and Sing with your child every day!

Talk, Read, and Sing with your Infant:

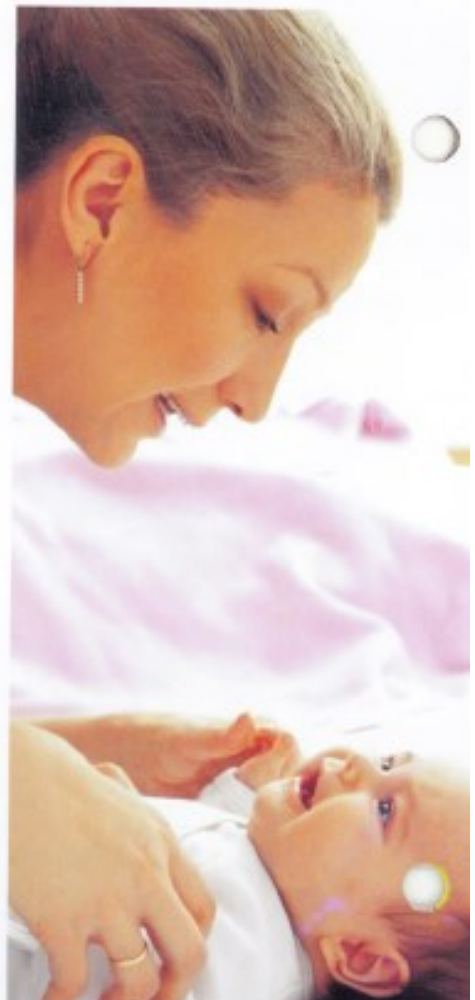
Respond to your baby's coos and smiles. Loving touch combined with back and forth "baby language" are the first steps in talking.

Talk and sing to your baby when you dress him, feed him, bathe him, put him to sleep, and take him for walks. Even if you can't sing, the sound of your voice is comforting to your baby. Describe what you are doing and what you see. When your baby responds with his own way of talking, acknowledge the response by answering. These back and forth exchanges are crucial for brain development.

"Read" picture books to your baby, describing what you see, to build language.

Talk, Read, and Sing with your Toddler:

Young children learn best during everyday activities. Everywhere you go, describe what you see. Comment on your routines. Label objects. Play games such as "I Spy" while shopping or taking a walk.



Read, read, read. It is not so important to read every word in a book at this age. What is important is interacting with your child, asking questions, giving the child the opportunity to fill in the blanks for a rhyming word or repeated phrase in a familiar book. And repetition helps. Babies and toddlers love to hear the same story repeated again and again.

Babies and toddlers love music. Music nourishes a child's brain and can be used to teach new words and concepts. Sing songs to go along with daily routines, sing fun songs with rhymes, sing songs with accompanying gestures.

Talk, Read, and Sing with your Preschooler:

Engage your preschooler in conversation. Ask questions that

require longer answers than one word. Follow up on questions to give the child the opportunity to extend a thought. Extend children's words by adding to the idea or introducing new vocabulary. Most of all, give the child enough time to respond. Back-and-forth exchanges are key to learning language.

Reading and singing with preschoolers are fun activities for both parents and children. Children can be asked to predict outcomes of stories, compare stories to their own lives, and comment on new words. When parents sing, children can repeat the song line by line, or they can make up new words to familiar tunes together with parents.

When parents consciously work on talking to their children, both parent and child benefit.



Technology and the Word Gap in the Home

All of us have witnessed the following scenarios: a family or couple sits around a table eating together, and there is no conversation because some, or all,

family members are engaged with their cell phones or other electronic devices. A mother is walking with a child, and rather than talking to the child, is busy talking to someone else on her phone. More and more, modern technological devices are interfering with our interactions with our family members. The number of hours we use screen technology is steadily increasing. Whereas in the past watching TV (or phone conversations) often took away from family time, mobile devices have extended the reach of this technology so that no family outing or activity is immune from interruption. Parent-child conversation, the ultimate vocabulary builder for children, thus suffers.

Studies have shown that the more we use technology, the more habit-forming it is, so that we are no longer even conscious of our behavior. Studies have also concluded

that interruptions from cell phones both interfere with our cognitive processes and change our emotional reactions. Most of us have had experiences where a phone call interrupts a train of thought that we cannot subsequently recover, or causes us to react inappropriately to a child's legitimate demands. Parents' use of technology also acts as a model for their children, which can cause these children to neglect opportunities for conversation and emotional connection with friends and family later in life.

Parents who are aware of the negative effect of computer use can take steps to diminish these effects. The most important thing they can do is program their devices, including phones, to shut down during family routine times, when most interactions with children occur. They can also insist that any programs or apps that children use also prompt them to engage in conversation and interaction with the world around them.

Computers are tools. We can use these wonderful inventions to enrich our lives without allowing them to take over.



The Benefits of Being Bilingual

Children of parents who speak a language other than English in their homes should be spoken to, read to, and sung to in their native language. There are many benefits to being bilingual and preserving the native language in children. Proficiency in one language helps proficiency in a second language.

(Read about the benefits of being bilingual in the November/December 2014 YVY Parent Newsletter, available online at www.yeled.org.)

RESOURCES

YVY Hotline:
718.305.5310

Press choice #1241 for a presentation on School Readiness by YVY Deputy Director of Mental Health, Alyssa Alexander LCSW.

For additional research-based tips for talking, reading, and singing with young children (also available in Spanish):

www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ecd/talk-read-and-sing-together-every-day